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ABSTRACT

This report on the March 1998 Spencer Foundation Conference, "Community Colleges: Issues and Research," identifies areas of needed research related to the mission and work of community colleges. It summarizes the comments of the conference participants and organizes these comments into three sections. The first focuses on forces that influence the mission and identity of community colleges: internal (i.e., students and faculty) and external (i.e., the economy, federal and state policy, technological changes, and local community demand). The second section explores research questions pertaining to students, curriculum and course taking, faculty and pedagogy, and institutional governance and culture. The final section focuses pragmatically on the organization and type of needed research. The need to contextualize studies of community colleges within an understanding of societal forces is discussed, as well as the nature of institutional research--how to best utilize the data already being collected, how to improve methods for collection of further data, and how best to reflect research back to the policy and practitioner communities. (KP)

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Report on the Conference:

Community Colleges Issues: Issues and Research

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On March 4th and 5th 1998, the Spencer Foundation convened a group of researchers and community college practitioners to identify areas of needed research related to the mission and work of community colleges. This report summarizing the comments of participants is organized in three sections. The first considers issues pertaining to the mission and identity of the community college; the second explores research questions pertaining to students, curriculum and course taking, faculty and pedagogy, and institutional governance and culture; and the third focuses more pragmatically on the organization and type of needed research.

Mission and Identity of the Community College

One of the recurring questions of the conference was, "What is the mission of the community college?" As a sector, community colleges are shaped by an ambition to be "all things to all people." There are no widely established boundaries encompassing what community colleges can do or definitions concerning what they should do. At times during its brief history and in different community colleges, liberal education or technical education have received differing degrees of emphasis. Currently, there seems to be a commercial and economic impetus toward technical instruction in industry-specific skills. Further, each local community has unique educational needs that may place more specific detailed demands on a two-year school than on other higher education institutions. In the face of these diverse forces, it is sometimes difficult for community colleges to develop an internally- or normatively-driven identity--to answer such questions as: What are the priorities of community colleges? Toward what purposes should community colleges be propelled? For any direction proposed, what are the assumptions underlying such a push?

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Research is needed concerning the mission of community colleges. The influence of mission on the shape of institutional governance and service to students needs to be investigated. Researchable questions might include: How does the organizational history of a community college play a role in its mission-formation? How do the stated missions of community colleges affect their service to students? What is the relationship between how a community college measures success and its

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mission? Do community colleges with clearer institutional identities have greater success with students? In what ways? By what criteria? Are there some community colleges that have greater success at conducting internal conversations about goals, mission, and the resolution of conflicting influences, and if so, what are their organizational characteristics? What is the impact on institutional policies and members of defining success through traditional measures (retention, graduation, and transfer) versus adding alternative measures or valued outcomes (such as social tolerance, community building, or citizenship)? What might alternative measures look like?

Internal Forces

Acknowledging that concern for students, contrary to popular belief within many community college settings, does not always drive curriculum, pedagogy, and policy for community colleges, participants emphasized the importance of keeping students' needs at the forefront of discussion. This is desirable even though defining what is "best" for students is complex. Economic considerations are often regarded as primary--how will this practice help students obtain employment or improve their work performance? Participants questioned this assumption: Is an immediate market benefit the only, or even prime, determination of "best"? One conferee offered the estimate that community colleges provide 30-40 percent of the general education in the United States, representing a potentially enormous amount of "cultural transfer" as well as educational capital. If there is a sole focus on the occupational benefits to students, the nation loses a significant educational mechanism for basic citizenship and social responsibility.

Community colleges have long been attuned to broad demographic trends, yet this is but one piece of the information they need to serve students and their communities. Student and faculty personal identities and experiences at community colleges are equally important. Researchable questions might include: Do the ways in which community college students primarily define themselves--as workers, as parents, as students--affect how they experience their education? What is the impact of being the first in one's family to attend a community college? What meaning does community college have for racial, ethnic, and language minorities, and how does that affect their broader experiences in higher education? How can community colleges better serve all their students? What is the experience of faculty at community colleges? What is the relationship between faculty members' personal and career goals and the classroom experiences of their students, their pedagogy, or their participation in the life of the college? What is the impact on both students and faculty of the increasing reliance upon part-time instruction?

The role of organizational self-definition is hardly abstract. Participants pointed out that institutional identity will shape cultures and policies at a college that directly affect students and faculty and how they experience community college schooling. For example, if a two-year school conceives of itself as a "nurturing" institution, such a place may have a variety of programs to support part-time students, student-parents, students who need remediation, or students whose cultures or language differ from the majority. Further, a strong or weak internal identity may influence whether a college

embraces or resists outside pressures that conflict with or support its mission.

External Forces and Policy Issues

Participants mentioned four major external influences on community colleges: the economy, federal and state policy, technological changes, and local community demand. As stated above, the economic and policy context plays a critical role in shaping community college policy and practice. Deindustrialization means that the United States economy is becoming increasingly bifurcated; jobs in the middle are being eliminated while there is an increasing need for both high-skilled professional and low-skilled service and manufacturing workers. Community colleges' curricula may be pulled toward greater emphasis on the high-end, and therefore toward transfer to four-year colleges and universities, or toward vocational-technical education as defined by local and national industry. As a researchable question, what is the interplay between economic trends and the curriculum and experiences at community colleges?

Federal and state policies that are not necessarily directly related to education can have a profound impact on community colleges. Some emerging welfare policies, for example, allow for longer periods of education before requiring recipients to find jobs; others mandate short-term training. This "tide" can sway whether and how community colleges attempt to serve individuals receiving public assistance, as well as other students. Community colleges must also be aware of changes in immigration policies and how these affect the community college population. Other policies have a direct effect. For example, generous funding for workforce development may encourage community colleges to focus upon offering related instructional programs. Research is needed to determine the impact of apparently distal policies, such as welfare reform or immigration, on community colleges and their students. How do more proximal or internal policies, such as changes in the K-12 system or remediation policies, affect the institution as a whole or particular populations within a college? What is the impact of state accountability mandates for statistics on transfer, remediation, or marketability of skills?

New technological modes of organization and communication have an impact on community colleges. For instance, on-line classes mean that students may have less chance of working collaboratively, while those same classes may also offer opportunities for working and parenting students to study when it is most convenient for them. Some colleges are now starting new terms every two weeks, modeling a more open enrollment than ever before. How does increasing use of technology in classrooms and the institution as a whole affect critical factors such as enrollment, retention, graduation or transfer, quality, or other indicators of success?

Finally, community needs translate into demands that influence each institution. Local industry and economy, municipal politics, K-12 school systems, and the demographics of the population directly

and indirectly influence curricula, policies, and practices. Some community colleges may be quite responsive to their local communities, while others are "greenhouse" institutions, with missions and programs less dependent on and/or less driven by local needs. However, all institutions are influenced to some degree by their local communities simply because they draw students from that community and because community colleges, more than other colleges and universities, are expected to be responsive. What relations exist between school districts and community colleges? Are there partnership models that effectively implement developmental curricula between colleges and school districts or community educational projects?

Students, Curriculum, Faculty, and Institutional Governance

If a single strong theme emerged from the discussions at the conference, it was that there is no typical community college. Community colleges vary widely depending on numerous internal and external forces, some of which are local and some of which are local responses to broader trends. Nevertheless, conference participants articulated some commonalties about these institutions, even across widely varying settings. The following sections describe in broad strokes the current state of community colleges in terms of (1) students, (2) curriculum and course-taking, (3) faculty and pedagogy, and (4) institutional governance and culture.

Students

One commonality among community colleges is their service to diverse and distinctive student populations. Demographically, community college students are more likely than those at four-year schools to be of non-traditional age, to be working full time, and to be parents, especially single parents. Many community college students have limited incomes or receive public assistance. Many are the first in their families to attend college. Conference participants noted that there appears to be a bifurcation in the pattern of student attendance--many students drop out almost immediately, within the first several weeks; many others persist in overcoming many obstacles to attend school. What factors correlate with or predict these patterns? A seemingly simple, yet critical researchable question is: What do students want from attending community college? How do their expectations differ by ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and other factors? How do students' goals affect their school experiences? How do organizational structures support or hinder the achievement of student goals? For example, is it efficacious for students with limited English skills to expend all of their Pell grant monies to attend ESL classes? Are the needs of "shadow" students being served by the institution? Since students may take many years to graduate and may patch together coursework at various institutions, how can researchers track and count these students? How can institutions and researchers evaluate community colleges' services to these students?

Community college students' self-identities and course-taking patterns are telling: two-thirds of

beginning community college students identify themselves as "workers who happen to be going to school" (versus one-quarter of four-year students). Large numbers of students do not enact the traditional pattern of attending a single institution for two years and graduating with a degree; instead, many attend several institutions at once or successively, taking longer than two years to graduate or not graduating at all. Researching the meanings that students create about community colleges and about themselves in community colleges represents an important area of study. How do students see themselves? Why do they attend other community colleges? What are their identities when they enter, and how do their identities and cultural tropes match with the meanings of the community college? For example, do students who differ in ethnicity, gender, class, or age differently perceive the meaning of "college knowledge" and academic discourse? If so, what are these meanings and how are they formed?

A majority of high school graduates of color begin their post-secondary educations at community colleges. However, the racial and ethnic composition of community colleges nationally is in a period of change: relative to white students, the proportion of African-American students is decreasing while that of Latino community college students is increasing. Nevertheless, approximately 70 percent of community college students nationwide remain white. Conference participants suggested that studies need to examine the intuitive notion that diversity on campus is essential and to continue to study the impact of diversity. How do important emerging federal, state, or local diversity policies affect students differentially by race and ethnicity? What conditions maximize the diversity of students on campus? What kinds of recruitment, retention, and academic supports enhance the experiences of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and language backgrounds? Similarly, what types of programs are needed to support the achievement of low-income students and students who are welfare recipients? What outreach policies are most successful in recruiting disadvantaged students? What are the complicating and specific issues for working students, for parenting students, and how might they be addressed?

Academically, a majority of the students entering community colleges are in need of remediation. The participants noted a need for studies of current trends in remediation policy and how these broadly affect post-secondary educational quality and access. Research questions include the following: How do various community colleges define remediation and what definitions are most useful? Relatedly, how do remediation demographics differ by race, gender, and socioeconomic status? Are there differences in remediation enrollment in terms of "lockstep" students (those directly from high school) and older and returning students? What can we do to ensure that students move beyond remedial classes? What is the current state of remedial education in terms of student achievement and assessment of the remedial programs themselves? In other words, what kinds of remedial programs work best, and for whom? How can community college curricula, pedagogy, and programming support the successful transitions of students in developmental classes to college-level courses?

Curriculum and Course-Taking

Community colleges have traditionally shared three curricular foci--academic/transfer, vocational/technical, and remedial/adult education. Technical education programs are growing rapidly, as are programs of workforce education. The curricular policy of a college as a whole, however, may not be reflected in departmental offerings, and actual course-taking patterns further contrast with what is "on the books." Moreover, an expanding "shadow" curriculum exists--both matriculated and non-matriculated students take non-credited classes.

Curricula differ so widely across institutions that the pressures that shape curriculum must be examined locally. An important research question is: What drives the community college curriculum--external forces, internal organizational imperatives, the needs of students? Which concerns have become paramount? How does the enacted, delivered curriculum diverge from the official one? How do various components of the curriculum interact, e.g., if a history course is part of mechanical vocational training, might it become "the history of the automobile"? How do curricula in various "tracks"--academic, vocational, "shadow"--interact? How do economic forces--such as local business and industry and larger economic trends such as deindustrialization--drive curricula and/or course-taking? What impact do funding streams have on curriculum development? How do institutions such as professional organizations and unions affect curricula? What pressures do changes in the social context, such as liberation movements or political events, exert on course-taking/curriculum?

How do diverse students negotiate course-taking? Are there significant differences in enrollment in various curricula (for example, technical training programs or transfer curricula) based on race, gender, language diversity, socioeconomic status? How well prepared are graduates of community colleges for transfer or employment? Do transfer students at four-year institutions succeed? Are employers satisfied? For vocational and workforce curricula, how are students faring in terms of salary, long-term employment, and job satisfaction? Do community college graduates form network affiliations supportive of civic and community values of certain kinds? What is the cumulative effect of curriculum at community colleges--what are students learning?

Faculty and Pedagogy

The community college is a paradigmatic example of the direction that many organizations in the late twentieth century are moving--toward a virtual institution, with increasing reliance on technology and "outsourcing" of staff. Thus, many of these institutions hire large numbers of part-time instructors, have fewer tenure-track positions available, and extend the work of faculty through tele- and on-line courses. Simultaneously, in some community colleges there is increasing pressure on full-time faculty to publish in order to obtain tenure, in a mirroring of four-year research-driven institutions. However, some community colleges continue to have strong and unique faculty cultures that include long-time employees, powerful unions, and relative faculty insulation from administrative influences.

Research is needed to document shifts in the composition of faculty and to develop portraits of their work. Are faculty who choose to teach at community colleges different than faculty for whom work at such institutions is a "dream deferred" from a four-year institution? How do career aspirations affect practice? How can we address the alienation and fracture between being trained as a researcher and then teaching, for example, remedial writing? Are graduate schools training academics for work at community colleges, and if so, how? What are the advantages and disadvantages to the preponderance of part-time faculty, and for whom? What kinds of communities can be forged among part-time faculty? Given the short career ladder for community college faculty, what types of progress toward equity can be made? What changes occur in faculty governance when the majority of the faculty is part-time? What is the role of these faculty in institutional decision-making about programs and institutional policy?

Pedagogical practices, like culture and curriculum, are best examined locally. Which pedagogical practices best serve various populations of community college students? How do faculty backgrounds and identities influence pedagogical choices and other interactions with students? What is the impact of distance learning on pedagogy? As community colleges rely more on distance learning, what is the impact on student-faculty and student-student interactions? Can and how would the formation of learning communities affect pedagogy and students' experiences inside and outside the classroom? Are there differences in race or socioeconomic status among students enrolling in learning communities? How can pedagogy take into account the power of so many external forces--the economic, social, and political contexts--and realistically attempt to address student goals and needs? In other words, what is a powerful pedagogy at a community college?

Institutional Governance and Culture

Community colleges employ various patterns of governance. Some have appointed boards, but many have elected boards; in some localities, election to the community college board can even be a stepping stone to other local government offices. Internally, many mid-level community college administrators are faculty members who were promoted to administrative positions but have not had special training in management. What educational and training opportunities will help prepare community college administrators and mid-level managers? What has been the impact of graduate degree and other short-term programs for training community college administrators and policymakers?

External forces related to funding decisions have a large influence on the decision-making of community college personnel. A decline in state appropriations for two-year schools, for example, has led many community colleges to seek more federal monies and private grants. Such a compensation strategy may mean that institutional actors look first at what monies are available, and

secondarily at how their institution's goals and needs match the proffered funds. It follows, then, that "dollars at the margin" sometimes have a great influence on what occurs at departmental and even institutional levels. Because a great deal of funding is targeted, these small amounts of discretionary funds offer one of the few areas of programmatic flexibility.

At community colleges, as at many institutions, funding and policy-making have an entangled relationship. Conference participants pointed to a pattern of organizational policies "following the dollar," rather than dollars following design, and argued that researchers must examine how "dollars drive design." What are effective methods for allocating funds? How do new funding streams impact the community college curriculum and the development of a college culture? Does such a practice lead to further balkanization of the institution?

Community colleges differ greatly in terms of their cultures. How can the cultures of community colleges be most usefully characterized and documented? Do community colleges with defined cultures have higher levels of success in terms of traditional measures such as graduation and transfer? Does it matter what the culture or institutional identity is, or simply that it is strong? How will community colleges serve different populations, i.e., students who vary by race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, age, and other factors?

The Organization and Type of Needed Research

Another theme of the conference concerned the process and products of educational research. Many expressed concern that past research has not been extensive or adequately conducted. They focused on the nature of institutional research: how to best utilize the data already being collected, how to improve methods for collection of further data, and how best to reflect research back to the policy and practitioner communities. Participants also discussed the need to contextualize studies of community colleges within an understanding of societal forces. There was consensus about the usefulness of using a variety of research methodologies in studying community colleges.

Colleges in Societal Context

Participants emphasized that holistic studies are needed that focus on the interaction among college mission, student lives, curriculum, faculty work, and administration, and that community colleges cannot be studied apart from the more general educational, social, and economic contexts in which they are embedded. Concerning the latter, community colleges are part of a K-16 system; they do not serve their educational function in isolation. Further, each community college is part of a community and serves multiple functions in addition to offering traditional degree-granting programs. One conference participant affiliated with a two-year school, for example, estimated that 75 percent of the college's local community had a work relationship or relationship of some other type with the

college, indicating an enormous two-way impact. Finally, the rapidly changing economic and political landscapes demand responses from community colleges. Important research questions include: What is the impact of the local community on a college, and vice versa? How do economic and political factors influence program and curricular development and student goals? It is also important to identify new ways in which colleges are connected to their communities, beyond serving community needs.

The United States is a leading member of the global economy; the deindustrialization of many urban areas and the country as a whole means that the structure of work is shifting. While economic considerations are not the only ones that community colleges must address, the question of how to prepare students for work is certainly a fundamental issue. Community colleges are also obliged to attend to federal and state policies which affect their funding sources, curricula, faculty, and, most importantly, students. Some emerging federal policies, for example, which have a great potential to affect community college students include welfare reform, immigration policies, and affirmative action. These represent other foci of needed research.

Institutional Research

Participants noted that while large data sets are collected, organized, and maintained at both the national and institutional level, they are currently underutilized. Participants considered the barriers to local institutions and researchers using national data, as well as the obstacles (both institutional and external) to faculty and administration using the information already known about students. Many community colleges also collect demographic and outcome information on students; to support the broader use of this data, institutions might be encouraged to develop and use a template for data collection. This practice would standardize data collection to help ensure that data would be available to researchers and institutional staff. Participants were enthusiastic about the usefulness of a template to standardize data collection but mentioned two cautions: (1) there are often "political" factors involved in the type of data that is collected and disseminated at each community college, and (2) the effort to create a template and ensure its use would entail a major commitment of time and funds. To begin this multi-year project, researchers would need to conduct a study of steps that have already been taken toward standardization and investigate the kinds of data that are currently available or unavailable.

Participants pointed out that in designing new studies, the research community should address several questions, including the following: What national or state data would be useful, and what must be collected locally? What should be the unit of analysis--the organization, a subset of people within the college, the community? Will the methodology yield what we want to know? For example, if a study is an attempt to investigate how many students drop out of community college within the first two weeks, then routine institutional research using data regularly collected by institutional researchers is adequate. If it aims to discover the reasons for dropout, however, other data collection methods including interviews might be more useful. Participants also suggested that classroom research

conducted by community college faculty members, case studies, life histories, and ethnographic research on community colleges would provide much useful information and may help to understand, compliment, and shape quantitative data. Researchers must ask: Who is the audience of this research--the public, legislators, community college administrators, faculty, or students?

Finally, conference participants described the critical need to convey the conclusions of research back to policy makers, the broader community, and to community college audiences/constituencies. Conferees suggested four critical components of this process: (1) the research community must find ways of involving stakeholders from the beginning of new projects; (2) researchers need to increase their policy and media savvy; (3) venues for contact between policy makers, the public, the media, and researchers should be improved and increased; and (4) the "packaging" and dissemination of products should be built into funding in order to broaden the impact of research.

A Note from the Spencer Foundation

The Spencer Foundation sponsors occasional conferences to stimulate research on important issues in education. We thank Howard London, Lois Weis, and Ronald Williams who helped organize this Conference on Researching Community College Issues, Hannah Ashley for her role in writing this report, and the individuals who participated (see listing) for their good work and contributions. We hope that interested researchers will find the theoretical, methodological, and topical issues raised at the conference thought-provoking. The Spencer Foundation welcomes well-designed research proposals on issues surrounding community colleges, their populations, organization, and impact.

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